THE LIVELIHOOD PATTERS OF THE IMAMS IN RURAL BANGLADESH: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The Imams of the mosques are woefully lagged behind from the development in rural areas. Therefore, the author aimed to conduct this study for generating knowledge on the living standards of Imams in the context of rural areas of Bangladesh. In this case, he applied the qualitative research method and collected data based on the observation and the Focus Group Discussion methods. In consequence, this study identified that a student can be appointed as an Imam of the mosque as usual by studying at the religious educational institutions. Along with they are far away from many activities, banned by religion, society, and the country's law. As a result, they get the highest honor from all and sundry in the society. But as a matter of fact, the economic conditions of them are vastly lowest among all professionals, signaling inequity towards them. Even so, it is worth noting that they are poor members of society. Therefore, the rich people and policymakers have to pay all attention to reduce the economic vulnerabilities of them so that they can exist to serve the people as usual.

Keywords: Imams; Social life; Economic state; Rural areas; Bangladesh.

1. INTRODUCTION

Matter of fact that Bangladesh is a developing country in the South-Asia, surrounded by the Bay of Bengal, India, and Myanmar. More especially, it is an agriculture-based country, because 50% of total labors are in agriculture, as well as 70% of inhabitants are directly and indirectly related to agriculture (MEF, 2012). Simultaneously, around 165 million people live across the country in which 90% of people are Muslim (Snyder, 2019) and others are Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians; averting it is a Muslim majority country. It goes without saying that the Muslims are directly relating to the Mosque body and soul because they pray every day at the mosque. The household word "Mosque" comes from the Arabic word Masjid (a sacred place of prayer) (Shah et al., 2015). In general, the mosque is a house for saying the prayer of the Muslim, covered by walls towards the Makka (a significant city of Saudi Arabia) in the eye of Islamic rules (Utabrta et al., 2015). In other words, a mosque is a place where people meet with each other; practice religious activities; and decide in a body to commit helpful actions for the community (Shah et al., 2015). Truly, the structure of the mosque varies from place to place or region to region based on the number of people under the mosques. But there is a common feature at every mosque across the world, such as- Mihrab (a niche in the wall towards the Makka) and Minber where the Imam or religious leader delivers their religious speeches (Stacey, 2012).

Actually, the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) first built a mosque in Madina (a city of Saudi Arabia) in 622, and elsewhere the mosques were built based on the spread of Islam (Shah et al., 2015). Simultaneously, it is also mentioned that the mosque was first built in Bangladesh in aid of Ikhtiaruddin Muhammad bin Bokhtiar Khiljee in the 13th century (Huque and Akhter, 2015).

It is true that the process of building the mosque was operational afterward in different areas of Bangladesh from the very beginning. As the case may be, the number of the mosque was raised era after era by turns, including- Sultan era, Mughal, British era, etc. (Reza and Hossain, 2017). In prior, Bangladesh was under British rule from 1757 to 1947 and a part of the Pakistan from 1947 to 1971 (Huque and Akhter, 2015). Besides, a vast number of mosques were built in Bangladesh by reason of the growing number of Muslims. Until 2011, 250,399 mosques in all are situated across Bangladesh according to the Bangladesh government (The BD News24, 2011).

Equally important, every mosque has at least an Imam who serves people day by day in exchange for salary monthly or yearly. There is no denying that compared with other professions; the Imams have many duties for the mosque and people (Sakil, 2017). It is now clear that they live under the poverty line from the very beginning because they get less salary than the day laborers, for instance, a day laborer gets an average BDTK 500 to 600 but an Imam gets an average BDTK 150 to 200 per day in Bangladesh (Habibi, 2020). Without the Imam of the four national mosques who get a salary from the government, other Imams get a salary from the mosque management committee as always. Therefore, they involve in other income sources by force of situations- most notably teaching the Holy Quran as home tutor (Hasnat, 2020). What is heartening to see, for the purpose of helping the Imams, the Bangladesh government established The Imam-Muezzin Welfare Trust in 2001 where the government donated BDTK 37 crores until conducting this study. As an example of the welfare of Imam, the trust trained 95,085 Imams by 195 trainers to earn money besides the

Imamoti (the duties of Imam) (The Islamic Foundation, 2020).

2. OBJECTIVES

The author believes that analyzing is essential for addressing social issues. Therefore, he intended to analyze the lifestyle of Imams in rural Bangladesh. Also, here are a few objectives for leading this study, like-

- To introduce the Imams;
- To show their duties;
- To discuss their social position;
- To describe their economic states.

3. METHODOLOGY

To begin with, the author searched several data sources, such as- Google Scholar, Research Gate, Science Direct, etc. regarding the condition of Imams in Bangladesh's perspective. But there was no specific study on the socio-economic status of Imams. Then he collected secondary data from journal articles, organization's reports, newspapers, and so on. The primary data were collected through direct observation and the FGD method where the author emphasized the duty, salary, and status of the Imams. To conduct this study, the author used the Bagerhat Sadar Upazila (a sub-district under the Bagerhat district of Bangladesh) as the study area. In total, the author used the rules and methods of qualitative research method by which he found out a descriptive result based on primary data without any numerical findings.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. The Quality of the Imams:

In general, when a student is Hazeez (Memorizing the Holy Quran), he can be able to be appointed in good part as an Imam of a mosque in the study area. Besides observing the Imamoti, most of them continue their studies in different Islamic educational institutes, such as- Kowmi madrasah (a type of religious educational institutes) or Alia madrasah (a type of academic institutions where both Islamic and general subjects are studied). More than a few Imams, indeed, take other income sources after completing their studies from those madrasahs in accordance with quality and others take the Imamoti as their certain profession. Equally important, someone becomes Imam having been educated from only Kowmi or Alia madrasah, ensuring that an Imam must study at the religious educational institutes in general.

The first and foremost matter is as an Imam, an individual has many duties in the good time for the mosque and the Musolli (The inhabitants under a single mosque). Typically, the Imam makes the Musolli say five times prayer per day as a leader of the mosque. That means the Musolli follow the Imam only for Foroz prayer (obligatory prayer) what the Imam does during prayer. Along with practicing the Imamoti, the Imams teach the children the Holy Quran, conduct Janaja (praying for the dead body), give a religious speech at the mosque every Zumma day (Friday). It is mentionable that the Imams live in the place given by the mosque managing committee although someone lives at their home who are near the mosque. Apart from this, most of the committees take the responsibilities of the food supply of the Imams with the help of the Musolli. Sometimes, the Imams, for the most part, eat by going to the home of Musolli or the Musolli send the meals for the Imams at the mosque.

B. The Social Status of the Imams:

Naturally, as a religious leader in the community, the Imams get more honor than the other professions in society. To cite an example, almost everyone treats them with Salam (greetings) when they meet. It is a custom in rural areas that the people take tea at the tea stalls and gossip each with others in various matters. When people see that the Imam is coming, they give up the bench of the tea stall for the Imams as usual. In addition, the people from the highest position, for example, administrative officials, political leaders, and higher educated people treat them with respect and called them Huzur (an honorable Farsi word). Even worse people respect those all-out efforts, for instance, drug users, smokers, etc.

Since the Imams eat at the house of the Musolli, the homemakers always try level best to provide delicious and nutritious foods for them. Moreover, as the Imams are free by any means from all types of evil tasks, sins, and profanes; the people, at the bottom, believe them more than others in the society in many cases. On the other hand, people make them the witness of agreements, marriage, and so on because they won't tell lie, be that as it may. Having beliefs in full on them, people go to them to get effective and real suggestions. Because the Imams play a vital role in order to prevent people from crimes and develop society in many ways. Except for their certain duties, they make people understand by all means that selfishness, using drugs, smoking, eve-teasing, corruption, and bribe are responsible in full swing for destabilizing the society and the barriers to the development. Furthermore, the Imams convince the inattentive students by far to engage in education. Even, they admit those students at the madrasah and motivate them to continue their studies well.

C. Economic status:

In as much as the Imamoti is the main profession; the Imam gets salary monthly in accordance with agreements with the committee in the study area. The salary structure depends on the number and economic status of the Musolli; as an illustration, the average income is BDTK 1500 to 2500 monthly. That means their daily income is below BDTK 100 which is an insufficient amount to maintain family costs. In contrast, a day-laborer gets BDTK 400 to 500 per day when they sell their labor in the fields. And, a child laborer or woman gets usually BDTK 250 to 300 per day from the owners. It makes perfect sense that the Imams get a lower salary incredibly than others. But they obey in due course their duties for the whole month and they request for the vacation to the committee or give another Imam for those days. Unfortunately, the salary is not enough for only him; therefore they seek other income sources in the long run for the families and the future. Thus, they choose different types of income sources, such as-cultivating shrimp, fishing, shop keepers, the share of the business, mechanic, and so on. The Bangladesh government paid attention to them and provided many opportunities for training them so that they can get else income sources besides Imamoti. More often than not, with Imamoti in the nick of time, studying at the madrasah, caring family issues; they can't able to take training in the study area. For this reason, they are deprived of the valuable opportunities given by the government. Above all, in spite of the lower economy, they serve society with earnest in the face of all hazards.

5. CONCLUSION

It is increasingly clear that since Bangladesh has a developing economy, every profession has a lower salary than other developed countries. In this case, the Imams are lagging behind undoubtedly on a large scale. Of course, though their social status is high, the economy is at the lowest position in the community on the score of others. It is a matter of optimism that the Bangladesh government tries as much as possible but a large number of Imams didn't get the opportunities somehow or others. For this reason, the mosque managing committees have an significant role to develop at any cost the economic status of the Imams. In reality, they can collect more money with might and main from the Musolli and raise the salary of them as much as possible. It is also mentionable that rich people should raise a helping hand for Imams. Moreover, the policymakers should emphasize on the issues of the Imams and try to initiate effective strategies by analyzing the criticism of the Imam-Muezzin Welfare Trust. Because, it spends most of the time for serving the mosque, Imams, Muezzin. Last of all, the trust has to address the problems of the Imams and make the government consider the issue of the Imams before long.

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